



COVID-19 and Sustainability in Higher Education: Reflective Review

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a lifestyle designed for permanence. Sustainability is the comparatively simpler idea, which can be explained in purely descriptive terms as the capacity of any given system to exist and reproduce on a long-term basis. The development adds a value judgment by implying the desired evolution of human society. Sustainability in Higher Education calls us to new sets of relationships-with our students, with each other, with what we learn, and with ourselves. In this reflective review the researcher has attempted to reveal some common facts relating to COVID-19 and sustainability in the higher education.

Keywords: COVID-19; Sustainability; Higher Education; Reflective review

INTRODUCTION

The notion of sustainable development was introduced into the political agenda by the World Commission on Environment and Development through its report, also called the Brundtland report (Axon & Darton, 2021; Hummels & Argyrou, 2021; Sneddon et al., 2006; Zaccai, 2012). The report does not provide a precise definition of sustainable development, but the quotation summarises as follows: ‘Sustainable Development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ The concept of Quality of Life thus embeds into the process of sustainable development, which includes the importance of health, culture, and nature. However, the principles of sustainability are defined considering the foundations of what this concept represents (Axon & Darton, 2021; Sardana et al., 2020; Van Looy et al., 2005). Therefore, sustainability is made up of three pillars: Economy, Society, and the Environment.

METHOD

In this reflective review the researcher collected data using secondary sources and used mainly various peer reviewed journal articles and various government and agencies publications. The researcher also used personal reflection from the higher education practice.

The measure of reflection explored the experimental research methods (primarily reflection) using literary forms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainability in Higher Education calls us to new sets of relationships-with our students, with each other, with what we learn, and with ourselves. As and higher education business lecturer, the researcher always believed a deep satisfaction from teamwork, a shared engagement with purposeful and meaningful action can help overcome discouragement and maintain the inclusive momentum (Junus et al., 2016; Niswaty et al., 2017; Rengifurwarin et al., 2018; Saggaf et al., 2017; Salam et al., 2014; Syam et al., 2018). Our higher education is our future, it is about preparing our nations and peoples for better lives, and about increasing their ability to strengthen their communities through art, research, technology, innovation and entrepreneurial activities. Colleges and universities exist to contribute to a better world where there is less hunger, less disease, more prosperity, more joy, more freedom and more love (Barlett and Chase, 2013).

I would slightly deviate myself explaining the concept of sustainability considering the COVID-19. I was thinking to consider stability instead of sustainability but decided to go with sustainability as it covers a wider perspective in many ways. I was reading and reviewing the draft proposal from Universities UK where they proposed the government to take immediate action to help the universities during this unprecedented time. The draft indeed highlighted how the help and assistance are requested from the government to help maintain the stability in the higher education sector. Now for those who are not very familiar with the University UK, let me provide a brief background. Universities UK's roots lie in the 19th century when informal meetings took place involving the vice-chancellors of a number of universities and principals of university colleges. In 1918 the first formal consultative meeting of all 22 vice-chancellors was held and in 1930, vice-chancellors agreed to formalise the arrangements, concluding that 'it is desirable in the common interests of the United Kingdom to constitute a Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) for purposes of mutual consultation'. On 1 December 2000, CVCP became Universities UK. For over 90 years Universities UK have spoken out in support of universities and the higher education sector, seeking to influence and create policy, and to provide an environment in which member institutions can flourish. Universities UK remains the essential voice of our universities – supporting their autonomy and celebrating their diversity (universitiesuk.ac.uk).

Their proposal to the government is of course a request of financial aid to support the stability of the higher education institutions following COVID-19. It is noteworthy to mention that universities generate more than £95 billion for the UK economy and over 940,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Universities also develop highly skilled people who drive UK and global business productivity. Universities and higher education providers are providing opportunities for people of all backgrounds through access to improved life chances, driving social mobility, improving quality of life by social and cultural impact. They are conducting cutting-edge, high impact research that addresses local and global challenges (including COVID-19). Our higher education institutions are fuelling economic growth through job creation, research and innovation, attracting inward investment, supply chains and providing a multiplier effect on local economies and last but not least creating civic leadership and impact through supporting local communities and businesses, providing services and facilities and driving regeneration of places.

We must have to accept that COVID-19 has created an immense risk in the higher education sector on its capacity and also on the ability to deliver quality education and providing required

facilities to our students and staffs. There is a significant role to play to sustain and maintain the sustainability of higher education and without appropriate investment from the government it is absolutely impossible. The report highlighted few major immediate financial impacts for the 2019-2020 academic year which are as follows: loss of income from residential accommodation, catering and conference, Easter and summer vacations amounted £790 million in the UK. The report also highlighted the 2020-2021 academic year financial risk which includes: a significant fall in international students and a rise in undergraduate deferrals. The report predicted that a 100% fall in fee income from international (Non-EU and EU) students would result in a £6.9 billion loss of income to the UK higher education sector (Universities UK, April 2020).

The risk and the impacts are huge no doubt and thus a shared consensus require to provide a sustainable solution to the post virus time. The initial proposal of introducing a flexible visa system (Home Office need to act urgently), stabilising the demand from EU students, reprofiling SLC tuition fee payment to institutions in 2020-2021, reprofiling the funding allocations, providing bridging loans and also broadly consider and confirm that UK universities are fully eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and are fully eligible for the Coronavirus Business Interruption Scheme and the COVID-19 Corporate Financing Facility needs appropriate immediate attention (Almetwazi et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Naroo et al., 2020; Ong et al., 2020; Ratten & Jones, 2020).

Finally, a transformation fund to support universities over the next two to three years to reshape and consolidate through federations and partnerships or potentially merge with other higher education institutions, further education colleges or private providers can also be considered as a potential option. This transformation fund would support some universities to significantly change to achieve longer-term sustainability (not just short-term stability) and ensure high quality provision of skills to meet economic needs. The challenges are mounting and thus a co-ordinated plan is needed to maintain capacity and enable a swift recovery for universities in the United Kingdom. The government should act now before the entire higher education sector collapse broadly.

CONCLUSION

It is inevitable that to cope with this unprecedented time the world has faced educational institutions preparing a well devised contingency plan to deal with such situations. It is a duty of the institution to ensure the reliability and sufficient availability of information communication technology infrastructure, learning tools, digital learning resources in the form of Massive Open Online Courses, e-books, e-notes, and so on are of utmost importance in such severe situations. While imparting online education (if any) the institution should ensure the five distinct elements which include instruction, content, motivation, relationships, and mental health. Rigorous quality management programs and continuous improvement are pivotal for learning success and making people ready for any crisis-like situation.

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